



The Talking Circle Initiative

Talking Circles Listening and Speaking from the Heart

This initiative began as a way to engage our experiences of the life and death of the Vajra Regent in a container of practice. What is emerging is an appreciation for the talking circle's truthfulness and cradle of loving kindness as a practice for working with many issues in our community. The following shows how this initiative evolved from a spontaneous event at the Congress and offers some of the insights gained through the process.

Prepared by Alice Haspray

It is my hope that the spirit and practice of talking circles will become an integral part of the culture of communication in Shambhala society.

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Origins of the Talking Circle Initiative

Talking Circles: Listening and Speaking from the Heart

This initiative began as a way to engage our experiences of the life and death of the Vajra Regent in a container of practice. What is emerging is an appreciation for the talking circle's truthfulness and cradle of loving kindness as a practice for working with many issues in our community. The following shows how this initiative evolved from a spontaneous event at the Congress and offers some of the insights gained through the process.

Shambhala Day 2004: Excerpt from President Reoch's Address:

At the Shambhala Congress an initiative arose, known as Group 13, to explore our community's experience around the Vajra Regent. We all need the benefit of looking into the mirror of this situation, bringing out the wisdom and sharing this in talking circles throughout the mandala. I am happy to say that this is a recommendation to all centres in the plan, as well as opening up talking circles for other issues of deep concern.

From the Plan on a Page (document produced following the 2003 Congress)

Openness, inclusiveness and participation will be central values of this process of community reflection and renewal. All Shambhala Centres and groups are urged to hold community meetings during the year and establish talking circles to enable wisdom to arise around the experience of the Vajra Regent and other matters of deep concern to people throughout our community.

From Shambhala Community Plan

(long form—also from a document produced following the 2003 Congress)

7. Talking Circles

At the Shambhala Congress, a spontaneous group formed to discuss issues associated with the Vajra Regent. It became known as Group 13. The group formed a talking circle where each person could share their contemplation of the situation with the Vajra Regent and how they had worked with it over these nearly fifteen years. This process has continued in Halifax with two further meetings of a talking circle on this subject. That group made the following formal request to the President, which was immediately accepted:

We request that President Reoch encourage talking circles throughout the Shambhala mandala before the consecration of the stupa for the Vajra Regent. This kind of listening and speaking from the heart is a profound and compassionate pathway to healing our community and to purifying the ground on which the consecration will take place. We in this group are willing to provide practical guidance and to assist interested people throughout our mandala in setting up these circles of the heart.

In the words of the Halifax talking circle: “The process of a talking circle is simple: each person speaks, no one interrupts with questions or comments, and then the next person speaks. If someone does not want to speak, they simply pass, and at the end, if they wish to speak, they do. Each of us really listened, and when we spoke, each of us spoke from the heart. At the second meeting we had a free ranging discussion and focused on how to help this process go forward. For all of us in the group, it was a startling, truthful, and moving experience.” All centres are

encouraged to consider this suggestion. Alice Haspray has most generously offered to be of (long-distance) assistance to any centre that wishes to discuss how best to do this. In addition, at the extended board meeting in February, it was also noted that there are number of other matters in our community that could benefit from enabling people to participate in talking circles. These circles create the open, compassionate and non-judgmental space in which people can speak about matters of deep concern.

Bringing Our Experiences with the Vajra Regent to the Path **An offering to the Three Jewels of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha** *Compiled by Alice Haspray*

On Tuesday, January 6, 2004 about 25 Shambhala warriors gathered in the Halifax Shambhala Center's Snow Lion Room for a talking circle to speak from the heart about how each of us has worked with our experiences surrounding the life and death of the Vajra Regent. This circle was inspired by *Group 13* at the Shambhala Congress in November 2003, and several of the *Group 13* participants also attended. Participants on January 6 brought a broad range of experiences to the circle. Some felt they had received valuable teachings from the Vajra Regent, others felt they had been abused by him, and others felt everything in between. The gathering was characterized by gentleness, respect, openness, and honesty. Each person was fully heard and included. While the specific contents of the talking circle are confidential, everyone agreed that it would be useful to share insights that emerged. These notes mainly reflect comments made on January 6, but they also draw on discussions from *Group 13*.

The Three Jewels of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha

During the talking circle on January 6, many expressed appreciation for the teachings they received from the Vajra Regent, but they also articulated their sadness and confusion over his actions. People also expressed their deep gratitude for the Vidyadhara and his profound teachings. There were many voices and many ways that insight was expressed in the circle. These insights took the form of longing, of hindsight, of articulation of obstacles, of sadness, of regret, of confusion, of judgments, and of suggestions for the future. There was no lid on what any of us could express, except that we speak from the heart and listen without judgment.

When I was preparing to write these notes, it occurred to me that much of what was expressed could be related to the Three Jewels of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. On behalf of the group, please accept this as an offering to the Three Jewels. The following italicized sentences are quotations from *Arousing the Motivation for True Freedom from Samsara: The Practice of Taking Refuge* written by Sakyong Jamgön Mipham Rinpoche in 2002.

Buddha: I take refuge in the Buddha, the protector and enlightened one, who is an example for beings in this degenerate age.

Insights and obstacles to understanding the true nature of the teacher

- As Western students, we are still learning what genuine devotion to a teacher means in a Vajrayana context. Idealizing and demonizing the teacher are two mistaken or extremes views. When our idealized version disappoints us, we can flip into demonizing.
- It is the teacher's responsibility to understand the nature of proper conduct.
- When we don't understand that the teacher is human, then we also don't understand the implications of that human-ness.
- We need to truly understand the nature of non-theism.
- The Vajra Regent carried a powerful dharma transmission, which was passed on to him by the Vidyadhara. Out of fear of repeating the past, some of us could shy away from contacting the power of that original transmission. As a result, the Vidyadhara's teachings could lose some of their immediacy and potency.

Dharma: When I take refuge in the dharma, I take refuge in the truth of reality.

Insights and obstacles to understanding the true nature of dharma

- Mistaken views and misinterpretations of dharma can be deadly.
- It is necessary to have the courage to speak out when we see/experience something that does not feel right to us.
- Confusion over the actions of the Regent caused some of us to lose heart and to lose our connection to Vajrayana teachings in particular.
- Misunderstanding Vajrayana can lead to rationalizing harmful behavior.
- Things may not be as black and white as they seem. It is important to gain as much knowledge as possible regarding the circumstances surrounding the Vajra Regent, but it is unlikely that we could write a “definitive” account of what happened.
- Writing the history of what happened may be more like many people writing their experiences—many histories. Hearing all of these stories may help give shape to a truer and more penetrating sense of what happened—and give rise to further insight.

Sangha: The sangha is where I find friends and companions on the path.

Insights and obstacles to understanding the true nature of sangha

- When it became widely known that the Vajra Regent was HIV-positive, and that he may have passed this infection along to a young man, the sangha immediately divided.
- It was like everyone inhaled and froze. Over the years we haven’t always acted like a real community in that we haven’t really taken care of one another.
- There has been no way to really grieve for what happened.
- We should be mindful not to fall into group-think—of feeling that some views are acceptable and others are not. It is helpful to remember the Vidyadhara’s caution against group-think and party-line view, of feeling that there is some particular view that we must subscribe to.
- On some level, it is easy to understand why we, as a community, have avoided working through this. It is similar to what we may experience with our own families when secrets, taboos, and deep hurts are uncovered. We shy away—we don’t want to go there.
- Listening to one another’s stories and experiences without judgment is, in itself, an act of healing for our community.
- Some feel the need for a kind of truth and reconciliation process in the community.
- The lack of a formal apology to the Craig family is seen by some as an obstacle to deep healing for that family, and indeed, for the whole Shambhala community.
- There is a desire on the part of many to extend ourselves as a community to the Craig family, so that in some way we can acknowledge their suffering over Keir’s death.

Simon Luna and Alice Haspray offered the following observations about their experiences in *Group 13*:

We can be like the cosmic mirror that includes and reflects everything. Deep seated wounds and conflicts won’t go away. Though they are very difficult to work with, if we can gather to simply listen, and to allow space for everyone to speak from the heart, then it is possible to take steps towards opening and healing. The problems we have as a sangha are the same as the problems we have in our families and in our societies. Any steps we can make towards resolving deep-seated conflicts among ourselves can have a big impact in the world.

May this be a step towards that resolution.

Group 13
Talking Circles: Bringing Our Experiences with the Vajra Regent to the Path
Preparing the Ground for the Consecration of the
Stupa for the Vajra Regent

Submitted for the Draft Plan for Follow-up to the Shambhala Congress

Directly following the Shambhala Congress, participants in *Group 13* did not write anything to follow up on what happened at the Congress. I think this lack of a formal report was a reflection of the spontaneous and on-the-spot way in which the group was formed (following Kerry Crofton's inspired invitation). I also think that it was the result of the intensely personal nature of experiences in that group—experiences that were at first difficult to put into words. In Halifax, the continuation of *Group 13* evolved in an organic way when new people asked to be part of a talking circle because they were inspired by what they heard about the Congress and *Group 13*. Halifax Shambhala Center Director Richard John then invited Steve Seely and I to lead another group, and the journey continued. What is written here now is a response to the following question posed in the document sent out in advance of this Shambhala board meeting:

From a memo: 2. Advance consultation on this draft plan

b) Are there any matters that appear to be missing from this plan that, in your view, should either be included within the remit of one of the proposed Working Groups or Advisory Groups—or that should be treated as a separate topic altogether?

The short answer to that question is “Yes.” When *Group 13* first met at the Shambhala Congress, we all discussed how to proceed. What evolved was a consensus that the best thing we could possibly do was to listen to each other. We formed a talking circle where each person spoke for 5 or so minutes—sharing their contemplation of the situation with the Vajra Regent and how they had worked with it over these nearly fifteen years. The process is simple: each person speaks, no one interrupts with questions or comments, and then the next person speaks. If someone does not want to speak, they simply pass, and at the end, if they wish to speak, they do. Each of us really listened, and when we spoke, each of us spoke from the heart. At the second meeting we had a free ranging discussion and focused on how to help this process go forward. For all of us in the group, it was a startling, truthful, and moving experience. On January 6, about twenty-five of us in Halifax met for another talking circle that also included new participants, and on February 3, participants from *Group 13* and from the January 6 group met to discuss how to move forward with this process. Many potent insights and aspirations emerged at the February 3 gathering, but the strongest and most heart-felt suggestion that the group can offer at this time is the following:

Formal Request to Shambhala President Richard Reoch

We request that President Reoch encourage talking circles throughout the Shambhala mandala in the months before the August consecration of the stupa for the Vajra Regent. This kind of listening and speaking from the heart is a profound and compassionate pathway to healing our community and to purifying the ground on which the consecration will take place. We in this group are willing to provide practical guidance and to assist interested people throughout our mandala in setting up these circles of the heart.

Respectfully submitted on behalf of the Halifax continuation of *Group 13*, Alice Haspray

Calling a talking circle: suggestions for how to begin

The talking circle itself is like water or the air we breathe—it can be mixed with anything that matters to the heart. The talking circle is most importantly about speaking and listening from the heart. It is about speaking and hearing the truth. The following are excerpts from *Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior*. These provide a context for speaking the truth, *being without deception*, in the words of the Druk Sakyong:

If you tell the truth to others, then they can also be open with you—maybe not immediately, but you are giving them the opportunity to express themselves honestly as well. When you do not say what you feel, you generate confusion for yourself and confusion for others. Avoiding the truth defeats the purpose of speech as communication. Telling the truth is also connected with gentleness...If you are telling the truth, then you can speak gently, and your words will have power.
(pages 82-83)

*The essence of this way or path is transcending cowardice and manifesting bravery. That is the best and only way to invoke drala: by creating an atmosphere of bravery...The fundamental aspect of bravery is **being without deception**. Deception in this case is self-deception, doubting yourself so that you are cut off from the vision of the Great Eastern Sun. The dralas can only descend onto your existence when you have properly prepared the ground. If there is the slightest deception, you will dispel drala. From that point of view, deception is the magic of the setting sun.* (pages 108-109)

During the lifetime of the Druk Sakyong he introduced the process of *spontaneous insight* as a way to make group decisions, like choosing a dekyong. The talking circle shares that same spirit of spontaneously arising wisdom, and working with the talking circle is an opportunity for all of us to explore the nature of spontaneous insight.

In a recent conversation with David Rome about his own experience with talking circles, David recalled a moment when the Druk Sakyong told a group of his most senior leaders that they should be like “circle of arrows.” David did not say anything further than this, and apparently neither did the Druk Sakyong. What does this phrase mean to you? If any of you have any stories to share about anything that either of the two Sakyongs have said about the talking circle (or about circle all together) or about spontaneous insight, please send them on to me, and they can be shared with all of us through this website.

There is so much to say about how to call a talking circle, and at the same time the process itself embodies the essence of simplicity. To begin, I am going to offer four intentions that express the heart of this practice. These are reprinted from: **THE CENTER FOR COUNCIL TRAINING—www.counciltraining.org**. Jack Zimmerman is one of the main teachers of the council process at that Center, and a number of Shambhalians have studied with him. The terms “council” and “talking circle”, while not synonymous, describe essentially the same process. So here are these four intentions:

FOUR INTENTIONS OF COUNCIL

Speak from the heart

Listen from the heart

Speak spontaneously

Be lean of expression

Council uses four simple intentions that provide the basis for interaction in the council circle.

An 'intention' is a direction that we want to move in to the best of our ability, despite any difficulties we might encounter.

1. The first intention is to “speak from the heart” when you have the talking piece. This means to speak not only with your head and your ideas, but with your feelings as well. It means to tell your own story as honestly as you can trust in the moment. You have countless important and meaningful experiences. When you speak about them truthfully, you are speaking from the heart.
2. The second intention is to “listen from the heart” when another person has the talking piece. This means to listen without judgment, to listen with an open mind, even if you disagree with what the person is saying. Listen not just with your mind, but with your heart as well.
3. The third intention is to “speak spontaneously.” This means that we try to wait before the talking piece comes to us before we decide what we want to say. There are good reasons for this. First, if you are thinking about what you are going to say, then you are not listening completely to the person who is speaking. Second, when you don't preplan what you are going to say, you will often be surprised what comes to you when it is your turn.
4. The last intention is to “speak leanly.” Something that is “lean” doesn't have anything extra on it. When you speak, keep in mind that many others would like a chance to speak, and that there is only so much time. Use only those words necessary to get your point or story across. Please remember that no one is required to speak.

These four intentions provide the foundation for all council practice.

**These four intentions are reprinted from:
THE CENTER FOR COUNCIL TRAINING
www.counciltraining.org**

Some Suggested Guidelines for the First Meeting of a Talking Circle

Much has been written about talking circles. So far, my guideline to myself is the statement from my first teacher Shunryu Suzuki Roshi:

*In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities.
In the expert's there are few.*

So, all of these suggestions are just that—suggestions. If they help, use them.

The following guidelines are inspired by Christina Baldwin's book: *Calling the Circle: The First and Future Culture* and by my own experience in working with talking circles. Many of us have worked with 3-fold logic and it comes as no surprise that working with a talking circle can be looked at in terms of a 3-fold process.

The person calling the circle can be thought of as a host and as protector or a guardian of the intention of the circle. They are not so much a facilitator as they are someone who is carrying the intention and spirit of basic goodness of the circle. They are protectors of the process of speaking and listening from the heart. They do the groundwork so the circle can happen and they hold the space of the process. But their role is a transparent one—not a hierarchical one. They act as a *convener* and a *leader* in the sense of taking the lead to get the process going and holding the best intention of everyone in the circle. Host may be the best word to use.

I feel that it may be best to have the circle hosted or lead by two people—a woman and a man.

First: Calling the Circle

Set the intention. Write a simple statement of intent so that people can decide if it would be helpful for them to attend the circle

Gather feedback. Talk to others about your thoughts and listen to what they say. This helps to clarify the intention.

Offer an invitation. Clearly set the time and place and announce it in time for people to decide if they want to attend.

Second: The First Gathering of a New Circle

Prepare the space. Arrange the seating in a circle. Gomedens and zabutons can be arranged in a circle; chairs can be used as needed. Bring drala into the space by taking great care in setting it up.

While some circle traditions place something sacred in the center of the circle, I would suggest just letting the open and intangible space be the center and the binding element of the circle.

Open the circle. Some form of ritual is used to open talking circles. Here is a suggestion:

Begin with a gong and 15 minutes of sitting.
Chant the *Heart Sutra* as a way to invoke the lineage of awakened heart
Offer a Shambhala bow

Following the bow, the host tells the story of the idea and intention for the circle. Where did this idea come from? How did it come up?

Introduce the object to be used as the “talking piece.” A stone or something that connects us with the earth is a good idea. As we know, Sakyong literally means “earth protector.” The talking piece connects us directly to the present moment and to the earth. The talking piece is a “great equalizer” so that everyone has an equal voice in the circle.

Set the boundaries of the circle. The main boundary is confidentiality—what is said in the circle stays in the circle. People need to know that they won’t be gossiped about. Also, it is important that people stay for the whole duration of the circle.

To begin: Whoever is moved to, speaks first; then the talking piece is passed to the left. Or alternatively, the leader could speak first. Each person speaks from the heart and each listens from the heart. Speaking from the heart means that each person speaks from their **own** experience. Each person tells their own story and doesn’t speak on behalf of other people’s experience. Speak in the first person: “I feel this way; this happened to me; this is what I think, etc”

Silence is fine. If someone does not wish to speak, they can pass the talking piece to the person to their left. At the end, anyone who has not yet spoken can be asked if they would like to speak now.

When everyone has spoken (or had the chance to speak if they wish) offer a Shambhala bow to close this part of the circle.

Following the bow, the host can then ask if people wish to continue with a dialogue or discussion. If you are going to continue, the same guidelines help: no cross-talk, attentive listening, etc. The talking piece can be passed to a person when they want to speak.

The leader should set a boundary for how long the discussion will go on. The leader needs to read the situation and energy of the group so that it doesn’t go on too long. It isn’t good for the group *lungta* if people start to leave. In fact,

Third: Closing with respect and dedicating the merit

Find out if the group wants to meet again and schedule the next meeting if appropriate. Close with both dedications of merit and the Invocation.

Some suggestions for the host or leader of a talking circle

Susan Szpakowski offered the following observations about what seems to open the space and what shuts it down:

What opens the space?

Invitation, questions, heightened listening, presence, being willing to stay in unresolved poignant space

What closes the space?

Answers, control, speaking on behalf of the group's experience, solidifying, summarizing

**Websites, books, and Shambhala human resources related to talking circles,
council, non-violent communication, compassionate communication,
focusing, and forgiveness**

Websites

Center for Council Training

www.counciltraining.org

The Forgiveness Project—This is an amazing website!

www.theforgivenessproject.com

The Focusing Institute

www.focusing.org

Center for Nonviolent Communication

www.cnvc.org

Wisdom Circles

www.wisdomcircle.org

Books

The Way of Council—Highly recommended!

By Jack Zimmerman and Gigi Coyle

Bramble Books, 1996

Calling the Circle: The First and Future Culture

By Christina Baldwin

Bantam Books, 1998

Article

Searching for the Truth

that is Far Below the Search

By David Rome

in the *Shambhala Sun*

September 2004

(The article begins on page 60.)

People

Many people in the Shambhala community have been working with the talking circle form over many years. I know some of them, and I am sure there are many more people as well. Please let me know if you have been working with talking circles and if you wish to be a resource for this initiative. The following is a list of people who have experience working with talking circles. It is by no means an inclusive list, but just a starting point: Bill Scheffel, David Rome, Conner Loomis, Laura Simms, Trudy Sable, Ellen Mains, Magali Menesis (in Chile), Kerry Crofton, Judi Richardson, Bonnie Rabin, Jane Hester, Susan Szpakowski, Claudia Chender, Sera Thompson, Bob Ziegler

The Shambhala Institute has done much good work in exploring modes of communication, dialogue, and talking circles. Also, many therapists in the Shambhala community work with talking circles, and I am sure there are many European Shambhalians who are already working with talking circles.

Talking Circles

Background Resource Materials

The following articles are informative about all the work that has gone on about talking circles.

Use what seems useful and let the rest go!

List of Articles

1. Council

Reprinted from:

THE CENTER FOR COUNCIL TRAINING

An Extension of the Ojai Foundation

www.counciltraining.org

2. How to Use Talking Circles for Deep Communication

Excerpt from: *Master Facilitator Journal*

The Ezine for Facilitators

Issue #0098 April 29, 2003

3. Wisdom Circles

www.wisdomcircle.org

4. Healing Circles

From: ACNS Healing Talking Circles

5. The Talking Stick Circle

An Ancient Tool for Better Decision Making and Strengthening Community

Compiled by George Pór

<http://www.vision-nest.com>

6. Talking Circles to Deepen Communication

Excerpted from Healing ADD by Thom Hartmann

7. The Heart-Centered Circle Training Program

(Including some discussion of Focusing, Deep Listening, Genuine Empathy in Eugene Gendlin's work)

Dr. Kerry Crofton

WellBeing International

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COUNCIL

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Listen from the heart

Speak spontaneously

Be lean of expression

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www.counciltraining.org

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Excerpt from:

Master Facilitator Journal
The Ezine for Facilitators
Issue #0098 April 29, 2003

The feature article in this issue “How to Use Talking Circles for Deep Communication,” discusses the essence of this rich Native American tradition and guidelines for conducting a Talking Circle yourself in your work with groups of all varieties.

*When you put your knowledge in a circle,
it's not yours anymore, it's shared by everyone.*—Douglas Cardinal, architect.

The term “Talking Circle” comes to us from the Native American tradition and is again finding broad appeal in contemporary culture. Talking circles are being used by facilitators of personal and spiritual growth, grade school teachers, high school football coaches, religious groups, 12-step and other group therapy gatherings.

Within a talking circle, all members are equal and each one belongs to the circle, which itself represents the interconnectedness of its members and the cycles of life. The talking circle symbolizes a sacred space created where all who come, come to listen and respect the views of all others in the circle. A stick, stone, or feather (which symbolizes connectedness to the land) can be used to facilitate the circle. Whoever is holding the object has the right to speak and the others have the responsibility to listen.

A ritual to begin the circle is often used to create a safe place where members commit to keeping all that is shared in the circle confidential, to set an intention to open hearts, to understand and connect with others, and to maintain a spirit of reverence and gratitude.

In a culture where conversation is often considered a competitive sport—the loudest and the strongest overpower the soft-spoken--the safety of talking circle enables those hesitant to speak to express themselves. And for the wisdom of the group to evolve as all are heard and understood.

Guidelines for Talking Circles

Talking circles are usually convened to resolve a problem, discuss an issue, or to focus on a question of interest to all members. When working with a large group (thirty or more) consider forming an inner circle and an outer circle. Whoever is sitting in the inner circle can speak while those in the outer circle. Participants can take turns being in the inner circle. The group leader facilitates the discussion in non-judgmental way. In other words, instead of responding with words like, “great” or “good”, the leader can acknowledge or

clarify comments, such as, “I understand you are saying that...” listen. During the circle time, people are free to respond however they want as long as these basic considerations are followed:

Participants can indicate their desire to speak by raising their hands or waiting for the object to be passed to them around the circle. Generally the person holding the object speaks and is the only one with the right to speak, even if s/he takes a long time to think about what to say and there’s a pause in the conversation.

All comments are addressed directly to the question or the issue, not to comments another person has made.

Both negative and positive comments about what anyone else has to say should be avoided.

Silence is acceptable. There must be no negative reactions to the phrase, “I pass.”

Going around the circle in a systematic way invites each person to participate without a few vocal people dominating the discussion.

Speakers should feel free to express whatever is in their heart, in any way that is comfortable: by sharing a story, a personal experience, by using examples or metaphors, and so on. A person is absolutely free to say whatever is in their heart, without limitation, and in the safe and comfortable knowledge that nobody will criticize it or interrupt it.

If a person talks too long, people around the circle begin to discreetly cough. Too long is usually defined according to the situation, but could be three to ten minutes, depending on the size of the group, the topic, and how long the group wants to spend together. If you have the object and notice that others are coughing, it’s time to pass it along. (Use of a timer or gong would be highly inappropriate for a Talking Circle, as it’s an artificial imposition on the organic process of the Circle.)

The circle continues either until everybody has had one opportunity to talk (usually in a larger group with time constraints) or until each person, when they receive the object, expresses the feeling that they’ve pretty much said everything they have to say. It’s interesting to see how this works: the process is usually quite organic, and everybody pretty much “winds down” about the same time. That said, short circles can also be used to begin or bring closure to lessons in teaching or training sessions.

Talking Circles are both cathartic and healing, and are extraordinarily effective ways of bringing everybody into the process of communication and group life. Because you can’t speak until you have the object, the skills of listening carefully and learning how to remember what you want to say when your time comes are developed and exercised.

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WISDOM CIRCLES

www.wisdomcircle.org

To encourage and facilitate the use of circles, **Wisdom Circles** has formulated a set of guidelines that we call the Ten Constants. These constants have been inspired by councils of indigenous peoples, informed by support and dialogue groups, and drawn from our own experience. The Ten Constants create a safe container that allows participants to tap their innate capacity to relate to each other in a context of wisdom and compassion. From www.wisdomcircle.org

One: Honor the circle as sacred time and space by doing simple rituals to mark the beginning and end. A ritual creates a shared sensory experience and a demarcation from ordinary life. Light a candle, for example, or take a moment to breathe deeply. Share a brief period of silence or burn some incense or sage. Listen to a selection of evocative music or to a guided meditation. You can be as creative as you want with this.

Two: Create a collective center by mutually agreeing upon a topic or intention. This might be visioning the future, healing wounds, going within to learn more about ourselves, making decision or planning actions that sustain and enrich life for ourselves and others. A group may choose a focus specific to its needs, or it can allow for topics to surface determined by individual needs. A question is usually a useful way to frame the topic. Make a physical center in the middle of the circle

Three: Ask to be informed by our highest human values such as compassion and truth, by the wisdom of those who have gone before us, and by the needs of those yet to be born. You can also invoke mythical or historical figures who symbolize desired values. One person can speak for the group, or each person can do a personal invocation

Four: press gratitude for the blessings and teachings of life. Acknowledge and honor our interdependence with everything in the Web of Life. In silence, or by taking turns, give thanks for those things great and small whose gifts enrich and nourish you.

Five: Create a container for full participation and deep truth-telling. Allow each person to speak without interruption or cross-talk. Use a talking stick (or any object that has symbolic significance). The object may be passed around the circle or taken from and returned to the center. Respect a member's right to silence. Keep everything confidential

Six: Listen from the heart and serve as compassionate witness for other people in the circle. To be an effective witness requires paying attention to what's being said without interpreting, judging, or trying to "fix" or rescue the person speaking. It also means a willingness to discover something about yourself in the stories of other people.

Seven: Speak from the heart and from direct experience. When you are moved to speak, do so thoughtfully and with care. Avoid abstract, conceptual language, and stay in touch as much as possible with your feelings. As this capacity develops, you may be moved to share those feelings and to say difficult things without self-judgment and without blaming others.

Eight: Make room for silence to enter to allow for reflection, for meditation, for feelings to surface and for a sense of the sacred to emerge as the group proceeds.

Nine: Empower each member to be a co-facilitator of the process. If possible, designate a different person to be the circle-maker each time. This person readies the physical setting, initiates the opening and closing rituals and facilitates consensus on a topic. Encourage each other to give voice to feelings of satisfaction or discomfort with the group's process.

Ten: Commit to an ongoing relationship with each person in the circle so as to engender trust and caring among members. Extend that caring to other people, to the Earth and all her creatures by practicing capacities developed within the wisdom circle in daily life.

4

HEALING CIRCLES

We sit in the wisdom of all who have come before us

Speak from your heart

Speak from your experience and truth

Listen full heartedly to others

Hold the intention of simplicity and truth for us all

From: ACNS Healing Talking Circles

5

The Talking Stick Circle
An Ancient Tool For Better Decision Making And Strengthening Community
compiled by George Pór
<http://www.vision-nest.com>

“Three rules: speak honestly and truthfully from the heart; be brief; and listen attentively.”

“Speakers can speak from a deep place without concern that they will be interrupted, criticized or judged. Thus they can be more truthful, creative and less self-conscious... The process is not one of making strong arguments for or against something, or convincing one another of right or wrong, but a process of becoming still and quiet, connecting with greater wisdom. When the truth is spoken on some issue it is seen and heard as such- it rings true'.”

[3]

“It's listening without reacting or intending to respond, listening without being influenced by long-held images and memories or firmly held position, listening instead with a beginners mind... .” [2]

Circle Facilitation

Whether with humor, the weaving of words, or silence, strong leaders stay present and committed to what is actually taking place, rather than invested in the Circle being “successful”... a truly successful Circle is an authentic one, no matter how dark or unresolved the outcome.

Good facilitation is usually “transparent,” in the sense that members leave the Circle less impressed with the wisdom and power of the facilitator(s) than with a strong feeling of the movement and interconnectedness of the whole circle.

There are times when the talking stick doesn't go in round, but to the center, when somebody has spoken. Whenever another member of the circle feels moved to speak, s/he picks up the stick again.

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6

Talking Circles To Deepen Communication

Excerpted from Healing ADD by Thom Hartmann

Over the past few years I've had the privilege to spend time on several Native American reservations, as well as both attending and speaking at a major conference on Native American spirituality and wellness. One of the Native American rituals I've participated in numerous times is something called the Talking Circle, and my experience in both participating in it and also using it with groups of people is that it can be a strong healing agent and skill-builder for people with ADD. It can be used among friends, in school situations, and particularly in families and support groups.

In Native tribes from the Apache to the Hopi (which is a pretty huge cultural chasm) I've noticed something quite different from the way people communicate in white culture. Conversation in white (and even black and Hispanic - really, to generalize, I should probably say "mainstream American") culture is often a competitive sport. If there are several people together, the strongest conversational competitor will win out, dominating the conversation and often the group; the weakest may not be heard from at all.

Native American culture values cooperation over competition, and this is reflected in virtually every aspect of their lives and lifestyles. Many of the Native Americans I've met engage in conversation quite differently from the "American competitive style": they listen, usually looking down and not establishing eye contact, until the person speaking is completely finished. Then they talk, and they fully expect to be able to completely finish their thought before they'll be interrupted or the conversation goes off to another person.

This style of conversation is fully expressed in the Talking Circle. In this conversational situation, a sacred object such as a carved stick, feather, or something else meaningful is passed around the circle in a clockwise direction.

The "rules" for the Talking Circles I've been a part of are:

1. The person holding the object is the only one with the right to speak, even if s/he takes a long time to think about what to say and there's a pause in the conversation.
2. If somebody else in the circle wants to comment on what's being said, those comments are limited to noises which can be made through the nose, usually just a soft grunt of agreement. Negative comments are strongly discouraged or outright banned. Otherwise, each person must wait her or his turn.
3. When the object comes to you, you may talk about "whatever is in your heart." In other words, while there may be an overall topic that the Talking Circle is centered around, conversation is by no means limited to this. A person is absolutely free to say

whatever is in their heart, without limitation, and in the safe and comfortable knowledge that nobody will criticize it or interrupt it.

4. If a person talks on overlong, people around the circle begin to discreetly cough. “Overlong” is usually defined according to the situation, but could be three minutes to ten minutes, depending on the size of the group, the topic, and how long the group wants to spend together. If you have the object and notice that others are coughing, it's time to pass it along. (Use of a timer or gong would be highly inappropriate for a Talking Circle, as it's an artificial imposition on the organic process of the Circle.)

5. The circle goes around and around either until everybody has had one opportunity to talk (usually in a larger group with time constraints) or until each person, when they receive the object, expresses the feeling that they've pretty much said everything they have to say. It's interesting to see how this works: the process is usually quite organic, and everybody pretty much “winds down” about the same time.

Talking Circles are both cathartic, healing, and extraordinarily effective ways of bringing everybody into the process of communication and group life. Because you can't speak until you have the object, the skills of listening carefully and learning how to remember what you want to say when your time comes are developed and exercised.

I've seen Talking Circles have a powerful impact on groups of ADD adults and children, and in our family we often do them, and even will invite friends over to do them, as if they were a parlor game. (“Come on over to our house for dinner and a one-hour Talking Circle!”)

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THE HEART-CENTERED CIRCLE TRAINING PROGRAM

Dr. Kerry Crofton

WellBeing International

1. VIEW:

- a. What is the agenda, vision of this group?
- b. What is your role?
- c. What are your expectations of the participants?
- d. What are the participants' expectations?

2. METHOD: How will you facilitate the group within these boundaries?

How will you open the space?

How will you help people feel safe in this circle?

How will you encourage fearless and gentle from-the-heart communication?

How will you encourage the people to connect with each other at a meaningful level?

With their inner selves?

With the material being presented?

WHAT TO CULTIVATE:

WHAT TO AVOID:

3. FRUITION: Where are you guiding people? Outcome. Result. Continued action?

SOME SKILFUL MEANS

Focusing, Deep Listening, Genuine Empathy

Focusing is a practice developed by Eugene Gendlin. He has set out six steps to enhance our ability to get a body sense of how we are at that moment. This is an enhanced awareness — an inner act of focusing. We learn to tune into our innermost felt senses.

“Felt senses are subtle, pre-verbal sensations that ordinarily stay below our conscious radar. When protected from habitual judgments and granted friendly, inquisitive attention, felt senses can “open”, providing meanings, energies, and action steps that move us through blockages, uncertainties, and bias.”

Deep listening could also be called listening from the heart, whole listening, witnessing, listening without bias, or listening beyond concepts. To deepen our listening - to listen more genuinely and more fruitfully - we need to develop two separate but related competencies: listening within ourselves and listening to others. Without listening well within ourselves, without being aware of our own inner process, it is difficult to sustain an open space listening to others.

On the other hand, if we give too much attention to our own process, we lose the “other”. Through the practice of deep listening we find a middle way - we are able to hear within and without together.

... These practices serve to deepen listening by slowing the momentum of ordinary conversation and encouraging us to be fully present for others with an awareness that integrates body, heart, and mind.”

(Excerpts from the Halifax Shambhala Centre Banner - a Shambhala Institute workshop with David Rome on Deep Listening.)

Genuine Empathy, as I describe it, is not just reflecting what someone has said, “You sound angry.” It goes deeper to reflect the layers of our cocoon and core of our basic goodness. This contains our view of transforming “negative” energy, our “on-the-spot” approach to cutting through these layers of conceptual confusion to the raw, direct heart. When we focus on our own inner experience - listen within - and tune into the others, genuine empathy arises.

Topics For Facilitator’s Reflection/Discussion

1. My overall style in facilitating groups is:
Am I more comfortable listening or talking, or both?

a) my strengths

b) my challenges

- c) I know I'm mostly "in my head" when:
- d) I know I'm overwhelmed by my emotions when:
- e) I know I'm in the right mind/heart balance when:
- f) A good way to get back in balance is:

- 2. The part of facilitating that I enjoy most is:
- 3. The part of facilitating that I enjoy least is:
- 4. A good way for me to open the space is:
- 5. To draw a quiet person out:
 - 6. To calm an attention seeker; a debater; a distracter.
 - 7. To close the group:

The Skilful means is a question of: - discussion of how these are used:

- 1. Awareness
- 2. Appropriateness
- 3. Flexibility

Personal circles, layers of experience and levels of communication – for discussion

- 1. Superficial/mundane - general, "out there", non-personal, non-threatening.

Examples:

Neutral:

Negative:

Positive:

- 2. Outer - Personally involved, felt/spoken conceptually, at a "safe" distance.

Examples:

Neutral:

Negative:

Positive:

3. Inner - Intimately felt/spoken, direct from the heart. (Vulnerable, tender heart.)

Examples:

Neutral:

Negative:

Positive:

4. Secret - deep within, raw “underbelly” innermost core. (Wounds, regrets, dreams.)

Examples:

Neutral:

Negative:

Positive: